CRITICISM:

Business Girls and Beset Men in Pulp Science Fiction and Science Fiction Fandom[1]

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Introduction

In July 1931 New York City science fiction fan Arnold Wolf wrote to the editors of *Amazing Stories* pleading for "some good stories on atomic energy, biology, and the disappearance of women from the earth" (331). To Twenty-First Century ears, Wolf's list of themes is idiosyncratic, jarringly incongruous, and merely misogynist. But considered in context, it's a near paradigmatic example of the way the earliest American science fiction fans thought through changing conditions of existence in a rapidly modernizing society using science fiction motifs. Wolf's desire to read stories about a utopian consumer future fueled by a cheap, clean, and plentiful form of power makes perfect sense in the year unemployment figures first reached double-digits during the Great Depression.[2] His interest in biology also makes sense in context. Endocrinologist John Jacob Abel's well-publicized research into the functions of glands prompted respectable and not-so-respectable scientists and doctors, as well as science fiction writers and readers, to believe that youth might be regenerated, intelligence enhanced, and life extended beyond expectation by manipulating glandular secretions.[3] During a time when wage earners' life chances were significantly determined by macroeconomic changes beyond their control, the fantasy of becoming vigorously and perpetually young, as well as super-smart, was more than just psychological compensation; it preserved the notion that individual effort could shape the future.

To a science enthusiast like Arnold Wolf, as well as to progressive social engineers, mastery of the secrets of nature meant that men need not be satisfied with their natural or societal endowment, and that evolutionary and economic perfection were both conceivable and achievable. But modern science did more than ensure progress in the 1930s. As the histories of the eugenics movements and nuclear weaponry remind us, it also inspired more problematic efforts to remake society.[4] Not surprisingly then, in 1932, *Wonder Stories* answered Wolf's call with a mean darkly "progressive" little short story by Thomas Gardner. "The Last Woman" was premised on the notion that biologists' as-yet-unrealized ability to remake human bodies would make it plausible to consider eliminating women altogether. Gardner's tale features an

all-male human species created by a “peculiar” chemist, who, in his “dislike for girls,” determines a way to divert the powerful energies of the male libido to scientific research (15). With “all the energies that had been turned to sex and emotion … released for thought and work,” science advances rapidly and “Scientists” attain economic and political control of the Earth (16). Hoping to negate the recent “feminizing” of society, and convinced that “all progress has been due to the variability and mutation of the sperm,” the Scientists “determine that Woman must go” (18). In place of sexual reproduction, this queer new society uses a board-certified *in vitro* process to ensure that only ova capable of developing into men are fertilized and incubated. To finalize the Scientists’ control over the human reproductive process, all women (and men who are not Scientists) are slaughtered in a 34-day war. The Last Woman, the final bearer of emotion, sentiment, and romantic love, is retained as an atavistic museum piece, fit only to be gawked at by sneering hyper-intelligent (but burly) men who have perfected themselves and their society by dispensing with the messy and troubling business of sex.

Considering the imaginative lengths to which science fiction went to make the “world without women” story plausible (not to mention the lengths to which it went to represent male homosociality while disavowing homosexuality), I ask in this essay why so much energy was spent in the effort to engender the discourses of science and science fiction in such exclusively, and precisely heterosexual, masculine ways. Despite their explicit masculinist gender politics, the answer to this question is not found in misogynistic yarns that eliminate women in acts of imaginary gynecide, or even in stories about all-male worlds. It lies rather in tales that present women as more mundane subjects of science, which in this essay means as its inventors and financial brokers. That newspaper-gleaning SF authors wrote stories featuring women doing the work and business of science in the 1920s and 30s should not be surprising. After all, scientists such as physicist/radio chemist Marie Curie (the 1903 Nobel Prize winner in physics and the 1911 winner in chemistry) and geneticist Barbara McClintock (who was a Guggenheim grantee in 1933, vice-president of the Genetics Society of America in 1936, and its president in 1945) were prominent in the Sunday supplements.[5] However, in pulp science fiction such representations are very rare.[6] Most stories written before 1939 (and a lot after as well) treated women as Gardner’s story does, simply as the objects of science.

Between 1924 and 1939, only a few stories, represented here by Dr. David H. Keller’s “Air Lines” and George Frederick Stratton’s “Sam Graves’ Gravity Nullifier,” but also including William F. Temple’s “The Four-Sided Triangle,” treated women’s working relationship to science as a matter of fact. These stories, instead of casting women exclusively as distractions to vigorously male inventor-heroes, Beatrice-like guides to the future, or atavistic

repositories of sentiment, ask what happens to men, women, and business when women become key players in the usually exclusively-male-business of science and invention. While it is credible to see such characters as evidence of a "mildly feminist" attitude among some pulp SF writers in the 1930s, as Farah Mendlesohn does in a 1997 posting about "Air Lines" to the FEMINIST SF LISTSERV, I believe these representations of women as active shapers of science are not approving reflections of women working in science, but narrative propositions in early Twentieth-Century debates about the biological, psychological, and sociological effects of middle-class women working in such clerical occupations as stenographer, typist, and secretary. For Keller, Stratton, and Temple, the prospect of middle-class women doing work outside the home meant dramatic changes in the dynamics of heterosexual romantic relationships, the institution of marriage, the practices of housekeeping and child-rearing, and the performance of male and female gender roles.

I'll discuss these stories further later in this essay, but for now it's important to understand that these texts, interpreted properly, teach us about more than what was then a fairly esoteric form of popular fiction. They also document the persistence of middle-class anxieties about young women "adrift" in seductively enticing urban centers and embody a strong desire to re-anchor such young women to the domestic institutions of patriarchy (Meyerowitz). Moreover, the ways these stories integrate, assimilate, and deploy the real science and social science of the mid-1920s and 30s in conjunction with what Thomas Roberts calls the "newspaper reality" of the time, suggest that the speculative rationality of science and the romance of the inventor were visionary and authoritative discourses for many early Twentieth-Century Americans, many of whom felt adrift in the new century in part because of new sciences and technologies (12-15). Indeed, the sciences of biology, psychology, and sociology, and such labor-saving technologies as the electric vacuum cleaner, automatic washing machine, and sewing machine *were* key referents in a widely-dispersed moral panic over women leaving the home to work and live on their own.

The Wage-Earning Accents of Pulp Science Fiction

Before considering the moral panic over young middle-class women's challenge to early Twentieth Century notions of domesticity, it is important to understand that the usual representations of the science fiction published in the 1920s and 30s in *Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, and *Science Wonder Stories* are based on mistaken and misleading ideas about its first readership. Often characterized as a simplistic form of children's fiction or a prophetic popular literature written by and for scientists and technicians, pulp-era science fiction was neither. Between 1926 and 1939, the science fiction of the pulp magazine era was written mainly by middle-class freelancers who sold

commercial genre fiction to all the pulp markets, by inspired fans taking a turn writing their favorite form, and by a few doctors, naturalists, and other such men of science dabbling as popular *littérateurs*. Before being picked up by Street and Smith and the Clayton publishing group, the first SF magazine was published in New York by Hugo Gernsback, the son of a "well-to-do wine wholesaler" from Luxembourg, who lacking the educational credentials to work as a scientist or engineer in the new corporate industrial research laboratories started his own business selling radio parts, chemicals, and other materials to home experimenters (Moskowitz 228-31). And, according to the estimates of an early *Wonder Stories* editor, the first three magazines devoted to SF were read by about 50,000 people worldwide in the early 1930s (Hornig 73). In the United States, readers were largely but not exclusively wage-earning people who describe themselves in letter columns as students, engineers, radio operators, amateur scientists, mill hands, office workers, salesmen, lathe operators, enlisted men, and government bureaucrats. While there was a significantly visible contingent of precocious mostly middle-class boys among the letter-writers, most readers were the adults who provided the routine intellectual, clerical, mechanical and physical labor that made the new mass production economy function.[7] Too often these working readers of pulp science fiction are neglected, resulting in a serious distortion of its history, a misunderstanding of its wage-earning accents, and an inability to see the cultural work it once performed.[8]

While they came from different classes, the first readers, writers, and editors of American science fiction were all concerned about the meaning of and means of securing middle-class occupations, cultural privileges and living standards. As a result, until 1938, when John Campbell took the editor's chair at *Astounding* and transformed the class dynamics of the field, science fiction magazines are best understood in the way Michael Denning treats dime novels, as dialogic texts where mostly middle-class writers ventriloquized the working-class accents of their readers to advance their views of the world. This complex voicing, and the fact that both working-class and disaffected wage-earners *wrote back* to the magazines, make science fiction some of the best evidence we have of the ways a particularly beset urban group of would-be wage earners understood their prospects of attaining a middle-class life in the 1920s and 30s, and in particular how young middle-class women's move out of the home and into self-supporting occupations affected these prospects.

Women Adrift, Clerical Work, and Challenges to the Patriarchal Family

As recent work by several feminist historians has shown, significant new opportunities developed in the first three decades of the Twentieth Century for young middle-class women to live, at least for a time, in domestic arrange-

ments other than the patriarchal family, and to work as wage earners (Peiss, Piep, Enstad, Kessler-Harris, Stanshell, Fine, Kwolek-Folland). By 1900, according to Joanne Meyerowitz, "one in five urban wage-earning women lived 'adrift'" in this way (xvii). Some came from families unable or unwilling to support them until marriage. Others tried to escape abusive fathers or *fiancés*. Still others simply desired the freedom and excitement of life on their own in the city. Emancipated from the surveillance of the family and small town, some women experimented with radical and/or feminist politics, lived in novel lodging arrangements, dined in cafeterias and restaurants, tested new sexual practices, and imagined and performed innovative gender roles at work and home.[9] Far from representing discrete changes only in beliefs and values, this set of adaptations was a (r)evolutionary matrix of responses to the material fact that women living on their own needed to supply themselves with food, shelter, and social networks.

Work of any kind helped women sustain themselves in the city, but clerical work appealed particularly to young, well-educated, middle-class women because it was clean, light, and, compared to factory work and work as a shop girl, almost well-paying. By the turn of the century *New York Times* want ads for stenographers and typists appear under gender-specific headings. Addressed to "intelligent girls" and "young ladies," these ads seem to suggest that clerical work could provide young women with entry-level access to business careers.[10] But according to one 1903 newspaper account of the life of "The Bachelor Girl," monthly costs for "rent, board, gas, laundry and cleaning, telephone, elevator tips, and sundries" amounted to fifty-seven dollars. "Situations Wanted—Females" and "Professional Situations Wanted—Female" ads placed by young female stenographers the same month offer to work for six and eight dollars a week. At the higher end of the range, one "Help Wanted—Females" ad placed by a law office offered ten dollars a week, leaving even well-placed female clerical workers some seventeen dollars short of the break-even point. Even educated middle-class women working in what we now call pink-collar jobs found themselves hard pressed to provide adequate food, shelter, and clothing on their earnings.

These barely sufficient wages presented material problems for clerical workers, especially in areas of diet, clothes and entertainment. Many young women skipped lunch entirely to afford a good dinner, or to save up for a new dress or pair of shoes. Others made cocktail dresses double as work clothes. But what were creative tactics for maximizing their financial assets, inspired constant carping in newspaper coverage. A July 26, 1903 *New York Times* feature entitled "The Bachelor Girl: The Real and Ideal" describes the typical morning of female wage earners in judgmental terms: "She usually sleeps late; steeps her coffee while rushing through a hasty bath and toilet, eats her fruit and eggs in unwise haste, and hurries away to business leaving unwashed

dishes and unmade bed to await her evening return…" (SM7). By the 1920s, Lena Lake Forrest, an established business woman, advised her junior colleagues that both ballroom finery and the "mannish" straight-cut fashions of the teens were inappropriate office wear ("Simpler Dress" E12).

Clerical work's subliving wages also shaped young women's public and intimate engagements with the city. Apartment-sharing, living in single-sex boarding- or settlement- houses, or employer-provided residences helped reduce the cost of shelter, extend meager budgets, and provide companionship and support in lonely or tough times. Also, as Kathy Peiss relates, the new practice of "dating" enabled many single young women to exchange the promise (and sometimes the practices) of romantic companionship for the "treats" of such urban consumer entertainments as dining in restaurants, and going to dance halls, movies, and amusement parks. Additionally, young women seeking higher wages and a permanent career in business took advantage of educational, cultural, and occupational-training opportunities offered by the YWCA and Jane Clubs, such public institutions as libraries and museums, and private institutions as correspondence schools and business colleges. Forced by low wages to adapt their habits, behaviors, and life opportunities, many young business women insisted that they were merely responding to changing opportunities. But they were also eroding the authority of Nineteenth-Century notions of female propriety at the heart of the patriarchal marriage.

Though women had worked as typists, stenographers, and clerks since the late-1880s, only in 1908 did the figure of the "business girl" link these occupations to a particularly problematic kind of unattached white young woman-hood. Like the "flapper, vamp, rich heiress" and gold-digger, the "young, single, white collar woman" became a hotly contested class-inflected representation of early Twentieth-Century womanhood (Fine 139). Categorized primarily by their work, and described liminally as between childhood and marriage, the business girl was constructed alternately as a desirable developmental stage in a young woman's life preparing her for marriage, or as a perverse social anomaly promising to disrupt both business relations among men and marital relations between men and women.

As I discovered reading articles and letters to the editor published in the *New York Times* between 1908 and 1930, the nature, character, tastes, and life ways of female clerical workers were widely discussed matters of debate. Even when real clerical workers tried to appropriate such terms as "bachelor girl," "business girl" and "business woman" for themselves (preferring them, for example, to the term "spinster"), spurned men responding both as potential husbands and competing wage earners, as well as social authorities of both genders—lecturers, clergymen, social workers, and social scientists—rebuffed their efforts. When self-described business girls identified themselves as fun-loving, commentators described them as frivolous. When they described their

work clothes as practical, authorities deemed them mannish and told them to dress more femininely.[11] When they displayed an interest in make-up and ready-to-wear versions of the latest fashions from Paris, critics decried their lack of taste and feared for their morals. When they thought themselves cultured because of their reading in art and literature, they were caricatured as prattling *dilettantes* who bored their dates. When they complained about inadequate wages, social scientists provided them with unrealistic model budgets and prospective husbands advised them to get married. When single business women living in heated rooms with a gas burner plate on which to cook defined themselves as free from the constraints and responsibilities of marriage, men described them as cheerless drudges unfit to be mates. As *Times* reader Raymond Snavely wrote in 1914, business girls were far from "The Ideal Girl" from a male perspective (10). They simply could not compete for men's attentions without "the adorable qualities of femininity" which were embodied only in "the kind of girl whose quietness of manner and dress, sweet, clean freshness of appearance, and general air of decency, repose, and good breeding" make her "homelike, modest, … and a good housekeeper" (10). As Snavely's letter demonstrates, business girls were attacked wherever they seemed to deviate from qualities middle-class men desired in their wives.[12]

One reason business girls were attacked so rigorously and so intimately was because their entry into the office threatened both the availability of proper young women for marriage and to displace young men from occupations they saw as providing them with the economic foundation and gender authority on which to build a family. Until they were defined as "women's work," clerical positions were first steps on the ladder to proprietorship (Lynd and Lynd 59). As Lisa Fine argues, young men of the Gilded Age took entry-level jobs in business as "bookkeepers, office boys, copyists and clerks" with the expectation of forming personal relationships with executives and proprietors and thereby, scaling the corporate ladder, or acquiring the skills and capital to become entrepreneurs themselves (Fine 6; see also Alpern 33). According to Fine, male clerks were expected to (and expecting to) emulate the "manly" character of successful businessmen, who were figured in advice literature as "rational, logical, ambitious, forceful, strong, [and] practical" (Fine 52). Despite these gendered expectations, male clerks actually performed tasks that "muffled action, aggression, individuality, and personal autonomy" and required such qualities as "self-sacrifice and ambition in service to others" (Kwolek-Folland 53). With the regendering of clerical work, the ideological promise that it was a first-stage in a developmental process resulting in a fully-autonomous entrepreneurial male subject was no longer tenable. Women's presence in the office made it clear that, whatever Andrew Carnegie said, business was not in fact the latest proving ground of the "strenuous" kind of masculinity that had made America strong.[13]

Female clerical workers were often cast in cultural narratives aimed at men and meant to alleviate the multiple anxieties they themselves provoked. Because they were frequently young single women, and so, imaginably available, secretaries, stenographers and typists became figures of sexual fantasy in films, postcards, and novels soon after the turn of the century. In popular culture, she was sometimes "the innocent victim of lecherous men," sometimes "the fallen woman distracting and ruining men," but in any case always the object of male desire (Fine 140). By the 1920s the dominant popular image of the female clerk had her as "not only modern, pretty, resourceful, and unafraid to use her feminine charms, but also fundamentally good," a term which was meant "loyal and virtuous" (143, 141). As Christopher Keep argues about the Type-Writer Girl, such qualities reassured anxious men that the business girl would not significantly threaten men's authority, and, perhaps more important, assured them that this new woman was in fact still quite conventionally a women who "enjoyed wearing fine clothes and arraying herself as an erotic object for the male gaze" (422). After World War I, when it was clear that female clerical workers were a permanent feature of the business landscape, their sexuality was increasingly deployed in the interest of the boss, a conceit that was often literalized at the end of working-girl stories, when secretary and boss become husband and wife.

Business commentators and advocates for business women continued to understand the role of the female office worker in terms borrowed from patriarchal marriage, promoting the notion that office work offered young women training in the attitudes and skills they would need to manage their future husband's household. In addition to understanding better their future husbands' work, secretaries and stenographer-typists preparing for marriage would benefit from a short stint of office work by learning good work habits, sharpening their wits, and developing fiscal responsibility (Fine 63-5). Theodore Roosevelt highlighted its effect on young women's character, recommending that "every girl should have business training…[because] it makes her self-reliant, not a clinging vine, and if she marries, she can contribute strength to the partnership" (qtd. in Fine 94). And at least one self-declared "Pretty Typist" explained "Why Fair Stenographers Usually Make Splendid Wives and Mothers" in the pages of the *Washington Post*. The framing of the ideal relationship between male managers and female clerical workers in terms of a patriarchal marriage predicated on innate gender differences aimed primarily at teaching single, independent business girls how to be a "helpmate," which is to say to be adaptable and subservient in business and, in a later stage of life, at home as wives.

As a result of the yoking of the role of wife with the role of employee, women who took positions in business found estimation of their work abilities inextricably intertwined with estimations of their sexuality. In contrast to the

fantasies of sexy-secretaries-turned-loyal-good-girls, which helped office men see female clerical workers as subordinated women preparing for traditional patriarchal marriage, the "scientific" fantasies of the desexualized "business woman" espoused by business commentators often treated successful business women, especially middle-aged women with some executive authority, as biological failures. Drawing on both Darwinist and Social Darwinist rhetoric, traditionalists and feminists, psychologists, activists, and popular writers, had been constructing a discourse of "fitness" around women's roles in business since the 1870s.[14] Such feminists as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Eliza Burt Gamble responded to Darwin's claim of women's physical and intellectual inferiority (in *The Descent of Man*) with complementary evolutionary arguments of their own. Gamble aimed specifically at women's place in business, claiming that evolutionary competition leaves men "inherently competitive, egotistical, and aggressive," whereas women have developed an "innate understanding of the need for human temperance, magnanimity, and cooperation" (qtd. in Piep 34).

Biologist William T. Sedgwick declared feminists' appropriation of the authority of evolution as so much "biological bosh," but by the turn of the Twentieth Century, even business women were using a biologically-based gender-determinist discourse to debate the proper place for women in business. Writing in *Harper's Weekly* in 1903, Theodora Wadsworth-Baker contended that business "tends to make a woman coarse and to rob her of those distinctly feminine characteristics which have constituted her chief charms in society" (1015). A "business woman," who signed her April 7, 1909 letter to the *New York Times* only "X," was convinced by her work experiences "of the indisputable intellectual inferiority of the feminine mind." The public needed "a general nature course" to teach "such fundamental truths as our [women's] unconquerable physical disability and unfitness." To "X," seeking "real equality with man" meant a woman making "such a sacrifice of sex she will no longer be able to perform the functions of womanhood" ("Woman's Qualities" 10). Identifying herself as Mrs. John Martin, one feature article writer used evolutionary language and the logic of the naturalist to assert that "feminism" including "the enlargement of [women's] industrial opportunities, [and their] complete economic independence" makes men "superfluous and unnecessary," with the result that "man" had become "the drone in beehive" (SM4).[15] The biological threat of the business woman soon became a trope to be invoked with little explanation needed.

This biologized rhetoric of gender fitness caught female managers in a double bind. By definition, managers exercise authority over subordinates. Women who were managers were "expected to adopt masculine business behaviors and beliefs" but male office workers resented women who acted with authority (Kwolek-Folland 168). Even female executives distanced themselves

from such behaviors using the desexed business woman as bogey(wo)man. Speaking before a luncheon of the Chicago Fashion Group to a nationwide radio audience in 1938, Hortense M. Odlum, president of New York City's Bonwit Teller Fifth Avenue store proclaimed herself distinctly "not the 'hard-boiled' type of business woman," confessing that such women "scare her to death." Odlum advised women entering business not to be "tough": "Don't wear the pants. Men are the leaders in business, but women belong in the business world." The "greatest asset of the business woman," she continues, is "feminine charm and feminine clothes" ("Store" 51). Secretaries too, rhetorically the embodiment of the demure and perhaps sexually-available office wife, feared being cast in the mold of business women and losing the feminine traits they thought necessary for marriage: "I really feel that the business world rubs the bloom from a woman," one reported in 1925. Another explained that secretarial work "tends to make a business woman of her, thereby tending to detract sweet feminine qualities" (both qtd. in Kwolek-Folland 178-9).

Both the office wife and the desexed business woman were figures of implicit criticism of a new domestic ideology, the "companionate" model of marriage that was attractive to some self-supporting women, and which such scientistic Progressive sex educators and social reformers as psychologist John F. W. Meagher and judge Ben Lindsey (along with his writing partner journalist Wainwright Evans) were recommending to modern middle-class business men as a salve for the enervating conditions of modern life.[16] The keystone of the "mutually caring" companionate marriage "in which husband and wife would interact as friends and partners" was the companionate wife, a modern woman who was properly more concerned with "her own self-satisfaction and individuality" than the helpmate model of the nineteenth century (Piep 38-9; Kwolek-Folland 66). According to cultural critic Christopher Lasch, the companionate wife was imagined as filling the "multifaceted role of sexual partner, companion, playmate, and therapist" for her husband (11). Middle-class men (and those aspiring to become middle class), as well as women, were exhorted to alter their gender roles and invest more of their emotional life and self-satisfaction in their domestic life. According to American culture scholar Margaret Marsh, a "domestic man" responded to the demands of his companionate wife by

> agreeing to take on increased responsibility for some of the day-to-day tasks of bringing up children and spending [his] time away from work in playing with [his] sons and daughters, teaching them, taking them on trips. A domestic man would also make his wife, rather than his male cronies, his regular companion on evenings out. And while he might not dust the mantel or make the bed except in special circumstances, he would take a significantly greater interest in the details of running the

household and caring for the children than his father was expected to do. (166)

While modern men and women were both expected to change their ways in a companionate marriage, change was not borne equally. *Cosmopolitan* writer Rafford Pyke insisted that the companionate marital "union … involve [both] physical reciprocity … [and] psychic reciprocity," but acknowledged that "the community of interest" of such a union was "now [in 1902] becoming far more difficult because of the tendency to discourage a woman who marries from merging her separate individuality in her husband's" (qtd. in Piep 39). In a time when the "community of interest" of a marriage was still secured more by the wife merging her financial, political, and cultural interests with her husband's than by the husband successfully taking up the role of the domestic man, the companionate wife was frequently criticized for "failing to fulfill her feminine role as other-directed" (Kwolek-Folland 66).

Despite the rhetoric of companionship, the implication of such criticism was that household authority was a zero-sum game. In 1935, a *Fortune* magazine writer linked the rise of the companionate wife with declining male authority at home: "the male was no longer master in his own dining room and dreadful in his den, nor did a small herd of wives, daughters, and sisters hear his voice and tremble. He was, on the contrary, the more or less equal mate of a more or less unpredictable woman. And he resented it" (qtd. in Kwolek-Folland 68). Some men handled the challenges of companionate marriages with grace, but others felt unmotivated and ill-equipped to take up a model of masculinity centered on more emotionally-involved domestic relations with their families. Indeed, while popular advice manuals of the 1930s, such as Lurine Pruette's *The Parent and the Happy Child* and Roy Dickerson's *Growing into Manhood*, advised men to take an interest in raising their sons and daughters, the ideals of male domesticity could be difficult for real men to live up to. According to gender historian Michael Kimmel, few men had "developed the skills necessary for successful nurturing of children—patience, compassion, tenderness, attention to process" (Kimmel 205). Moreover, 1930s popular culture ridiculed men who lost control of their households mercilessly. In the new comic strip *Blondie*, "Dagwood Bumstead, Blondie's bumbling, incompetent, anti-hero husband, is the epitome of the breadwinner as boob." And in Clarence Day's *Life With Father* "Father [was] a blustering tyrant but one whose bark was decidedly worse than his bite" (Kimmel 205).

For men challenged by the demands of companionate wives, the office wife stood as a reminder of the perks of patriarchy. As Kwolek-Folland puts it, "what an office man wanted [from a secretary] was not a pretty, clever, expensive, individualistic wife, but someone to take care of the petty details of his life: pay his bills, balance his checkbook, [and] make reservations" (68). Sec-

retaries and female clerks who could be figured as office wives preserved the notion of unquestioned male authority for office men feeling pressure to frame their marriage in companionate terms and define themselves more as husbands and fathers than successful sole proprietors.

The deeply intertwined figures of the office wife, the companionate wife, and the business woman, as well as the office man and the domestic man were articulated and deployed in the first three decades of the Twentieth Century in response to dramatic, sometimes painfully-realized, changes in both occupational and domestic roles for both men and women. Developed to restrict women to short term dead-end clerical jobs, the office wife ideal also helped propagate a model of patriarchal marriage that American feminists had been challenging for a half-century and obscured the degree to which most business men were, themselves, subordinated in corporations. Similarly, the companionate wife, ostensibly a progressive role meant to enhance the quality of marriage for both men and women, served ultimately as a figure of derision that, in some hyperbolic formulations, helped limit women's occupational options and men's marital satisfaction. Taken together, the reactionary creation of the figures of the office wife and the business woman and the twin critiques of the new ideals of female and male domesticity highlight the problematic nature of the subordinated masculinity wage-earning men were expected to perform at work in the managerial hierarchies of the corporation in the 1930s.

The Office Wife, The Business Woman, and the First Science Fiction Fans

Though the "feminization" of the business office was a historical process that began forty years before the first issue of *Amazing Stories* hit newsstands in April 1926, the anxieties it provoked about the relationships among the economy, masculinity, and femininity were exacerbated by the Great Depression. As Margaret Marsh argues, successful performance of the problematic new ideal of domestic manhood (as well as performance of white collar masculinities) depended on men being on a stable, secure, remunerative, and progressive occupational trajectory (166). For the first generation of science fiction fans, primarily in 1930 young men of the working- and middle-classes aspiring to professional, white collar or technical careers as scientists, engineers, pilots, mechanics, or writers, such a trajectory was far from assured. Ambitious and driven, they particularly feared being relegated by forces beyond their control to dull factory or office work or, being out of work altogether. Many of the young fans who later became science fiction writers had sampled drudge work and found it enervating. Besides working every afternoon, evening, and weekend in his parents' candy store during most of his childhood, college student Isaac Asimov spent ten weeks in the summer of 1936 working at a job he described as "thoroughly unskilled" (157). Robert W. "Doc" Lowndes worked as a hospital porter for a time, and spent part of 1938 sleeping

in subways (Knight 8). John Michel worked at a five and dime (Pohl 80). Fredrick Pohl delivered letters for an insurance underwriting company for ten dollars a week (Pohl 79). Science fiction fan Chester Cohen quit a job as a jeweler's apprentice in 1939, telling his friend Damon Knight that it was a "terribly dull job, you know, mass production crap" (Knight 42). Even an ostensibly middle-class fan, such as future author and editor Donald Wollheim, whose father was a doctor in private practice, viewed his own occupational prospects with dread during the Depression: "The problem was that you had no future," he told Knight. "I mean, you were eighteen, nineteen, and there were absolutely no jobs, no openings, no anything. It was an endless futility—you knew what you wanted to do, but there wasn't a chance in the world" (Knight 8).

Young men of Wollheim's age faced distressingly uncertain occupational futures throughout the 1930s, whatever their education or training. As sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd's two Middletown studies demonstrate, educational preparation was no guarantee that young working-class men would find work in their chosen field. "I just feel that I am not wanted," one young man explained in 1935: "I was an honor student in school, but that does not get me anything. I have a girl, too.... She doesn't kick about it, and keeps me bucked up, but we are both missing the fun we ought to be having while where young" (*Middletown in Transition* 483). Still another young man despaired of ever getting married on his meager wage of ten dollars a week: "Hell! What's the use of my even thinking of getting married, let alone tying myself up in an engagement? I'm stuck! There's just no future for our generation, and there's nothing we can do about it. I don't expect to marry—can't hope to on this sort of job" (*Middletown in Transition* 151). As these statements suggest, young men deeply identified with their prospects for work. The inability to find work made it difficult from them to be breadwinners, to participate in the new mass market of public leisure activities, to afford to marry, raise children, or buy a house of their own. The social and material markers of modern manhood were particularly difficult for this generation of young men to acquire, and they felt it keenly.

For such men, stories of wives working could have been particularly stressful to read, raising the specter of dramatically different public roles for women and the prospect that male breadwinners might soon be extinct. But George Frederick Stratton's "Sam Graves' Gravity Nullifier" (1929) and David H. Keller's "Air Lines" (1930) "bucked up" readers by assuring them that their wives were working ultimately for their families and not for themselves. They also soothed male reader's fears of obsolescence by suggesting alternative ways for men to perform their masculinity, if only tentatively. Not surprisingly, Stratton and Keller do this cultural work by displaying the charms of the office wife and the social menace of the business woman.

"Sam Graves' Gravity Nullifier" examines the economics of technology to find a suitable place in the world of tomorrow for the young, intelligent women of 1929. The plot's basic concern is the sale of a gravity nullifier to Uinta Power and Light Company, personified in its "imperious" company President George M. Lundholm and chief engineer Hidreth. Unlike other science fiction stories of the period, the invention of the gravity nullifier is not the main event. As reader Clyde F. Beck, of Lakeport, California, wrote, Stratton's yarn is "more of a dissertation on business instinct than scientifiction" (980). Its drama comes in the form of contract negotiations. An inventor with "no business instincts at all," Graves leaves the negotiating to his "daintily dressed" young wife, Edna (468). In light of the criticisms aimed at business girls' frilly frocks, this detail hints at the privileged content of the story, namely determining the proper place for intelligent women in an industrial society. What "Sam Graves" asserts is that a woman may happily work in support of her husband, but that she must never let her work detract from the sweet feminine qualities that make her a good wife. In the story Graves is a master of mechanical incantation interested more in pursuing the romance of invention than in cashing in on the products of his imagination. Edna berates him when he suggests she sell his invention to Lundholm for a "million dollars if he'll give it." "'A million dollars!,' she gasped! 'Only one little million for a new power of world-wide applications?'" (468). Frustrated by her husband's underestimation of the value of his work, Edna leaves her "hammock" to beat Lundholm at the game of business.

In Stratton's version of the new industrial society, new roles have opened up for capable young women who have prepared themselves for success. Edna is just such a woman. She understands the economic and industrial implications of the gravity nullifier. While it is the engineer Hidreth who first speculates on the usefulness of such a device for the railroad industry, his idea turns out to be half-baked. Edna, however, has the answer to correct the flaw. And it is from Edna that Lundholm (and readers) learn how Sam's technology would revolutionize the construction of "skyscrapers, great dams and bridges" (469). Edna's preparation is not limited to her understanding of the nullifier's technological applications; she, like so many other young women in the 1920s, followed TR's advice and "had some office-training with men—real men, the Cartwright Cattle Company" (468). Here, businessmen are identified as possessing a masculinity fit for the frontier. In head to head negotiations, they compete ruthlessly, without sentiment, using craft and deceit to secure whatever advantage can be had.

Were it not for her distinct femininity, Edna's mastery of two masculine domains—technology and business—might have provoked discomfort for science fiction's young male readers. But her masculine competence is domesticated by her evident devotion to her husband. Like the office wife, whose

expertise is used in the interest of her boss, Edna's skills free Sam from the petty details of his life. She takes care of the financial negotiations for the gravity nullifier; Sam plays with his toys. Furthermore, gender plays an important part in the negotiations. When Edna comes to Lundholm's office to sell Sam's device, he underestimates her precisely *because* she is a woman. He prides himself on "his ability to quickly estimate any man." But Edna's pulchritudinous charms baffle him. He peers at her hoping to find "the shrewd, keen, cold eyes, the thin, tightly compressed lips, the obtrusive chin of the business woman." Such a woman, a female man, would play by the rules of business and could fairly be beaten in the deal. Unfortunately, Lundholm find himself "utterly bewildered by this attractive little woman in her sport skirt, her brushed wool sweater and jaunty hat pressed down on curly head so firmly that only the twinkling innocent eyes peeped at him from under the narrow brim" (469). It is in this passage that the significance of earlier descriptions of Edna, as a "girlish," "pretty," "bit of a woman" given to enjoying a box of chocolates while "snuggling into [her] hammock," is revealed (467-468). She brings a befuddling femininity to business. Despite her capable demonstration of the gravity nullifier, she seems to be nothing more than a "married flapper trying to play business." Unable to read her, Lundholm submits to her terms, buying the gravity nullifier for five million dollars cash, three and a half million more than he expected to pay (469).

At first glance, Stratton's story seems to open up new roles for women in business. Edna is competent and shrewd. But while Edna's dainty clothes and jaunty hats confound business expectations, her refusal to pursue her own interests in the negotiations assures readers that her interest in business is wholly subordinate to her interest in being a good wife to her husband. Though she has enjoyed playing the game of business immensely, Edna refuses a job with Lundholm's company when offered. A life of luxury secured, she will be content to go back to her hammock and chocolates. Ultimately, the message of Stratton's story is that modern married women should invest their talents in support of their husbands. It is quite correct for young women to work in business before marriage, but they must not risk becoming business women. To do so would be to foreclose on future domesticity.

Invested in a woman less other-directed than Edna, female competence in technology and business is a social menace, at least in David H. Keller's story "Air Lines." "Air Lines" is the story of hard-boiled inventor Beryl Angelo, a young woman who, possessed by the spirit of a "very feminine ancestor," inexplicably marries romantic fiction writer William Dills (936). After six months of wedded monotony, Beryl confides to William that "she was never cut out for a home." "Give me a machine shop," she says, "let me take control of a plane, or play with television, and I am happy as a song-bird in springtime, but shut me up in a home, to plan three meals a day and supervise

the laundry, and life is not worth living" (936). Clearly, being a wife is no job for a modern Twenty-First Century woman. The romance of invention is far more enticing than that of the family. Though she's pregnant, Beryl dreads the coming of her baby. "In my own silly way, I like you well enough," she tells William, "but it worries me to have you and the home and the baby come between me and my work" (936). William, author of "The Perpetual Honeymoon," reminds Beryl that she knew what she was getting into when she married him. Besides, he says, "I thought that a woman could not do anything more wonderful than to become a mother" (936). Such archaic talk infuriates Beryl. William is just not "air-minded" enough. He is stuck in the past as his sappy love stories prove. He should abandon the flawed sentimentality of the past and come into the Twenty-First Century, maybe even "win a trans-continental air race or invent a new variety of robot" (937). Unruffled by his wife's fury, and in a telling reversal of reader expectations, William kisses her on the cheek and sends her off to work muttering to himself that she should have married a "machine husband…, something that [she] could connect to a light socket for action and disconnect when [she] wanted rest" (937).

Uncomfortable thinking of herself as a wife or a mother, Beryl identifies with her work. She is first and foremost an inventor; in fact, she is the "head of [the] invention department" for Aviation Consolidated (938). Her dearest relationships are with the male business executives, financiers, and engineers who enable her to realize her inventions on a large scale. These men fear that Beryl's recent marriage will threaten her efficiency as department head during a time of great importance. They aspire to "make [their] company the leading company of the world" and need her genius for invention to do so (938). She promises that they'll have her full attention soon. She just needs a short vacation to invent a number of devices to take care of all her wifely and motherly duties, and then to give birth. There might even be a benefit for the corporation in her marriage. Echoing Thomas Gardner's conceit in "The Last Woman," she says: "No doubt, the liberation of my libido will enable me to perform even greater work than I have in the past" (938).

Though Beryl's attempts to automate her domestic duties fail miserably in William's eyes, she feels "that if the baby was well, was growing normally and cutting her teeth on the proper schedule, she, as the mother and head of family, was doing all that could be expected of her" (939). With her new inventions, she had "satisfied all the demands that even the most old-fashioned social code could place on a married woman," and returns to the office ready to work (939). Beryl devotes all of her time trying to perfect a fully-automated airplane, one that could fly itself around the world. Conceiving of the pilot as a function rather than a person in the same way that she treats mothering, Beryl seeks to replace human judgment with scientific calculation, intuition with the slide rule, both at work and at home.

Working in her backyard to forestall industrial espionage, Beryl is soon consumed by her work. William, on the other hand, has been taking time away from his writing to manage the household and learn how to care for his baby daughter Ariel. Cast as a sentimental old-fashioned emasculated fool, William has begun to identify himself with his childcare duties to the chagrin of Miss Agatha Trim, the hired nurse who can barely contain her contempt for William's "fool wife" (939). Part of William's daily routine is to take Ariel out to the airplane every afternoon and "play house" (941). They take a lunch along and have an afternoon nap. Unaware that the airplane has become a domestic haven for her husband and child, Beryl sends the airplane off on a test voyage around the world. When she learns that a drunken engineer has miscalculated the amount of fuel necessary to bring the plane safely back home, her rational, calculating inventor's mind is overwhelmed by wifely and motherly concern: "She could not sleep. She could not even close her eyes. At last she could not think" (942). She knows that the plane will run out of fuel over the Pacific. Her faith in calculation and automation has cost her "the husband that she had neglected, the baby that she had only given birth to and then placed in the hands of a nurse, the two beings whom she should have loved more than any others in the whole world" (942).

As one might suspect, Keller does not idly bring Beryl to the realization of the value of domesticity. William awakens to find the plane winging its way across the ocean. "Be a man," he tells himself. "If a piece of machinery can run this airplane, so can you" (942). He watches the robot operate the plane for a while and then disconnects it. Taking control of the airplane, he turns it around and heads for home, where he finds Beryl in tears, prepared now by her ordeal and her husband's masterful performance to take up the mantle of her womanhood: "Hand in hand the three went into the house. Beryl Angelo went to the phone and called up the offices of Aviation Consolidated and asked for the general manager. 'Hullo,' she said. 'This is Mrs. William Dills. Yes. Don't you understand! Mrs. *William Dills!....* Tell the president that I am going to take a three-months' vacation. I want to get acquainted with my family" (942).

If Stratton's Edna Graves is the ideal office wife, able to use her skill in business and her feminine charms to relieve her husband of the dreary details of financial dealing, Keller's Beryl Angelo, read straightforwardly, is science fiction's business woman, assertive, self-absorbed, and domineering. Whereas Edna's business skills enable her husband to devote his time to invention, the adventurous exercise of creative intelligence that defines masculinity in the science fiction of this period, Beryl's rejection of family and pursuit of career unmans her romance-writing husband William. Utterly bored by the domestic romance that is William's stock in trade, that is, by "home, marriage, the raising of children, and the preparation of innumerable meals," Beryl has forsaken

the bloom of her sweet femininity to live the romance of invention, work in the machine shop, and design the future (936). Unlike Edna, who loves the thrill of the game of business, but also the luxury of a good box of chocolates and dainty clothes, Beryl is masculinized by her business activities, as was the business woman (Fine 54). She is more like Sam Graves, whose dedication to the romance of invention means that he "doesn't want to be bothered" with administrative details (Stratton 468). Like Sam, Beryl has a "wife" to take care of the details of everyday life, albeit one in three parts. It takes William's child-care efforts, Miss Trim's occasional bit of gardening, and automatic devices to free Beryl to live her life as she sees fit, unburdened by the demands of mothering and home making. Her contribution to the home economy is indirect and unemotional, mediated by money and machines. Beryl is not just a business woman, she is the mythical breadwinner, whose economic prowess entitles her to be master of her own dining room and dreadful in her laboratory. Functionally, she is a man.

As must be obvious from my description, the ideological project of "Air Lines" is to teach Beryl the folly of her rejection of Gilded Age domesticity and the gendered division of labor associated with it. The career woman must be brought to see that her contributions to the economy cannot outweigh the inevitable damage done to husband and family. Even as the companionate wife seeks self-realization in the public sphere, Keller's story suggests, she must not aspire to be a man, to locate her identity and her worth in business. However skilled or creative she is, she should identify herself with her husband (as Beryl finally does at the end of the story, calling herself Mrs. William Dills for the first time) and work in support of her husband. The anxiety over business women expressed by male and female office workers and by Keller's story, then, was in part a fear that the family could not survive the reorganization of gender roles necessitated by the increasingly important positions middle-class women were filling. If family women honed the skills that made for success as managers, salespersons, and executives—authority, aggressiveness, orientation to results—who would nurture needy husbands and children? The fact that only seven per cent of the managerial workforce were women in 1920 did little to soothe this dread, as "Air Lines" evidences (Alpern 32). The thin end of the wedge had been set in place.

As much as Keller's story is critical of the companionate wife gone horribly wrong and become a business woman, it also condemns the feminized man for overly investing in domestic life. Spending his day playing house and cuddling with baby Ariel, William has forsaken the adventurous manhood that is at the heart of pulp fiction. While few men actually lived lives of heroic adventure in 1930, ongoing movements in physical culture, bodybuilding, athletics, and muscular Christianity testify to the continuing importance of a manly bearing in leisure and at home, if not necessarily at work. But sustaining such

authoritative models of manhood depended on his limited presence in the home. As one unemployed Depression-era man put it "when a man is at home all day he cannot possibly command as much respect as when he returns to the family for a few hours of concentrated conversation" (qtd. in Kimmel 201). If William's manhood is challenged by his "mothering" of Ariel, it is doubly doubtable in light of his predilection for writing sentimental love stories and his utter lack of interest in science and technology. William only regains his position as head of the household when he demonstrates his manhood to Beryl in precisely the terms she suggested. His mastery of technology, his calm efficiency in face of danger, finally makes him a man in her eyes, one worthy of identifying with, and subordinating oneself to. He can only live "The Perpetual Honeymoon" of his stories by rejecting modern domestic manhood for a more adventurous form and correcting Beryl's abandonment of home and family.

According to Farah Mendlesohn, Beryl "phones work to announce, not that she is giving up work to be a better housewife, but that she intends to take a six month holiday. Her boss regards her work so highly he doesn't bat an eyelash. This woman is treated no differently than an over-working man might be today." Under this reading, it might seem plausible to argue that Beryl and William are about to embark on a truly companionate marriage, one where they each maintain a career, and with the help of a nurse and some machines, share domestic duties equally. But I find such a reading overly optimistic, considering Keller's own cranky criticisms of companionate marriage in other stories and in his popular sexological advice manuals. In "The Psychophonic Nurse," a female free-lance writer learns a similar lesson to Beryl's, discarding her typewriter and mechanical mammy to don an apron and bake cakes. In "Feminine Metamorphosis," business women shut out of positions of power extract the chemical essence of masculinity from the testicles of Chinese men, pass as men, and soon dominate the world of business. Just as they are about to win political power, it is revealed that they have acquired syphilis along with manliness. The feminist conspiracy collapses and the female men die out one by one. Finally, in "Stenographers' Hands," Keller depicts companionate marriage as a tool of immoral corporations seeking to create and sustain an inexpensive population of clerical laborers.

The thematic consistency of these stories suggests that Keller's is a deeply-held belief. But the most compelling evidence of the depth of Keller's hostility to the new gender identities at the heart of the companionate marriage is found in volume five of Keller's *Sexual Education Series*: *The Companionate Marriage, Birth Control, Divorce, Modern Home Life.* Published in 1929, Keller identifies women's abandonment of the wife and mother roles as a key "cause of social unrest." In rhetoric that echoes that marshaled against the business girls, Keller blasts women working outside the home, the practice of birth control (which includes not only contraceptives, but also purposeful absti-

nence!),[17] new domestic technologies, apartment buildings, easy divorce, and companionate marriage. Supported by "modern utensils and electrical apparatus of all descriptions"—including vacuum cleaners, canned goods, and a telephone for contracting services, a woman is "able to finish her [house]work quickly," and leave for work outside the home (44). New apartment houses with inexpensive rent make it possible for young women to live away from home, but at the cost of failing to develop the proper practices of domesticity. Men and women both suffer familial deprivation as a result of such bleak living:

> In such rooms men and their women lived and are still living. There is no room for a baby. There is no provision for sickness, hospitality or comfort. It is just a place to stay in at night after the movie. Both the man and woman leave the house in the morning after a breakfast of coffee and toast cooked on an electric stove. They work all morning, eating dinner at a cafeteria. They work all afternoon. For supper they go to a restaurant or take to the apartment in a paper bag a meal, purchased at a delicatessen store. After supper they go to a movie. (47)

According to Keller, these socially-supported transformations of men's and women's domestic lives impoverish both genders and make it impossible for them to commit to a true and biologically-necessary form of matrimony, one where women subordinate themselves to men (72). Beryl, I think, is home to stay.

Women in SF Fandom

Women faced with such profoundly masculinist views nevertheless tried to write themselves into the nascent science fiction community. After lurking in the field for "quite a long while," Betty Mulharen, of Detroit, wonders why she had "seen only two other women Readers' letters" in *Astounding Stories* and declares that she had "finally decided to come forth with my own little contribution to 'The Readers' Corner'" (421). "I suppose," she continues, "most women are interested in love stories, though I fail to see anything very exciting in any that are written nowadays; and I crave excitement in my reading" (421). As Mulharen's self-deprecating rhetoric ("my own little contribution") shows, women who "decided to wander into new fields" in the 1930s were faced with a tough gender performance (421). Not only did they need to denounce a stereotypical femininity in terms their male correspondents would recognize, they also needed to seem circumspect and even demure to be accepted by fellow fans. More difficult to balance were the twin needs to display their requisite interest in science and to retain a distinct air of femininity. "Student scientist" Irene Frechette Bats, of Buffalo, managed the tension this way, concluding her letter to *Amazing Stories* by calling for stories that "exer-

cise the gray matter" and affirming that she is "no laggard either," having "won the International Beauty Contest of 1922 and seventeen other prizes" (379). Asserting her intellectual capabilities, and investing in a suggestive modern femininity, Batts presents male readers with a doubly troubling figure of modern young womanhood. As a result of the efforts of such women, the letter columns of the pulp science fiction magazines became, for a time, a place where the gender politics of science fiction and SF fandom were explicitly debated.

For avid readers and occasional letter writers alike, the letter columns were a kind of community bulletin board, where participants practiced formulating arguments, tried out new ideas, and voiced their anxieties and aspirations in terms drawn from and inspired by the stories themselves. Lively readers' letters were likely to receive comment by the editorial team and fellow fans. As a result, colorful language, creative form, and passionate arguments soon became the aesthetic norm. As male letter writers fought for space in correspondence columns, engaged in courtly contests of intellectual jousting, and defended their territory against feminine incursion, critical hyperbole, teasing character assassination and heated debates about the nature of science fiction and the literary and scientific value of particular stories filled the columns (Drown 203-56). While a great majority of the letters published in *Amazing* and *Astounding* were from men, letters from women appeared with regularity. Women who wrote to denounce love stories as sappy and to extol the virtues of science fiction, as Betty Mulharen did, were welcomed with open arms. Like Mulharen, "(Miss) Bernice Goldberg," of Mason City, Iowa thought that "this mag is a thousand times better than all those love story magazines, and besides these stories are educational" (274). Virginia E. McCay, Copperhill, Tennessee, wrote:

> A great many men and boys seem to think that girls do not care for science magazines, but they are wrong. Almost all of my high school girl friends do read *Astounding Stories*, or other science fiction magazines, in fact more girls read them here than boys. We may not be brilliant in scientific works, but we know enough about it to appreciate the fine stories in *Astounding Stories*. (430)

Despite such testimony young male readers insisted that women were incapable of understanding science fiction. Jim Nicholson, of San Francisco, California, and charter member of the Boys Scientifiction Club asked his fellows this question: "Did you ever notice that 75% of all the Readers who say they do not care for science in their stories are women? Besides that, the only ones at school who think I'm 'cracked' for reading Science Fiction are females. Figure it out for yourself" (418).

Male letter writers not only wanted to drive women from the letter

columns, fans such as Donald Turnbull, David McIlwain, and Isaac Asimov argued for the elimination of women from science fiction stories as well. McIlwain's statement is typical: "Science fiction (especially *Astounding*) does not cater to sentimental old maids who like a little bit of 'slop' in their literature. Neither does it cater to love-sick nymphs who attempt to gain the Elysium of their frustrated desires via the doorway of books. Your male readers greatly outnumber your female fans, so why not cut out the age-old love idea, and give us newer themes" (158)?

Mary Byers, of Chaney Farm, Springfield, Ohio, made the faulty and misogynistic logic of these arguments clear in her letter denouncing Isaac Asimov's call for "less hooey" in science fiction.[18] "To his plea for less hooey I give my whole-hearted support," Byers writes, "but less hooey does *not* mean less women: it means a difference in the way they are introduced into the story and the part they play" (160). Not content to display Asimov's "grave error," and playing by the rules of the verbal joust, she insults Asimov, suggesting that he is inexperienced with women: "he probably still cherishes the outdated theory that a girl's brain is used expressly to fill up what would otherwise be a vacuum in the cranium" (160).

Asimov's response came in a pair of letters published in February and July 1939. I will not explore his missives in depth; instead, I will suggest that Byer's masterful performance in the rhetorical joust grants Asimov the license Uinta president George Lundholm sought, namely to assert his manhood by beating up on a woman. Asimov opens his February letter with an explicitly violent image: "Having barely survived the bludgeonings of Miss Byers in the December issue, I return undaunted to the fray" (159). Kid gloves are off; this is a fight to the finish. In the next paragraph, Asimov "grants that women a pretty handy creatures," only to undermine his concession with a parenthetical remark that asks readers to consider a world without women: "What would we do without them, sniff, sniff?" (159). Arguing that most writers cannot write very convincing female characters, Asimov agrees with Byers that women rarely get to play good roles in science fiction: "Unfortunately, instead of having a properly aged, resourceful, and scientific woman as a savant, what do we have? When there is a woman-scientist (which is very rare in fiction, believe me) she is about eighteen and very beautiful and oh, so helpless in the face of danger (gr-r-r-r)" (159). But rather than placing this fault squarely on the writer's shoulders, Asimov assigns blame to women themselves: "Which is another complaint I have against women. They're always getting into trouble and having to be rescued. It's very boring indeed for us men. I should think the women themselves (proud creatures) would be the first to object" (159). Women, as they are represented in Asimov's witty but passively aggressive letter, are too provocative, evoking passionately inarticulate guttural moans rather than coolly-reasoned discourse. The only kind of woman Asimov can imagine

featured in science fiction is one “properly aged” and incapable, apparently, of turning a proud young scientist into a gibbering sex fiend (not surprisingly, one of Asimov’s own best female characters, robotocist Susan Calvin, would be both properly aged and resourceful). The upshot of Asimov’s argument is the proposition that if women do not like the way they are portrayed in the science fiction magazines, they should leave the world of men to the men: “let them go back to love stories (which are written by women for women)” (159).[19]

Asimov’s attack silenced Mary Byers. No retort from her appears in the following months’ letter columns. Even as other writers took Asimov to task for his interpretation of women’s roles in history (Rogers and Rogers), no one chastised him for failing to treat Mary Byers with the respect she had earned with her letter. Isaac Asimov had effectively defended the science fiction world against the alien it most feared: an intelligent and articulate young woman.

Conclusion

The misogyny of early science fiction and science fiction fandom is surely to be regretted. In too many stories, male autonomy depends on female subservience and the value of women is measured in their worth to men. In too many letter columns, women are patronized, dismissed, or ignored. But these stories and letters are more than merely sexist. They represent a complex negotiation of gender, occupational, and marital roles between men and women, between members of the working and middle classes. As I have shown, the wage-earning men who read science fiction felt beset by cultural and structural changes in work that undermined their authority at home and at work. The deployment of the office wife, the companionate wife and the business woman in Keller’s and Stratton’s stories enabled these men, like the business men Fine and Kwolek-Folland studied, to deny the subordinated masculinities at the heart of modern employment for men of their class and to believe that, whatever they said, these fascinating modern young women really wanted (or should really want) nothing more than to help their mate.

Despite the vigor of Asimov’s attack on Byers, Keller’s views on women’s proper place were not entirely authoritative in the world of science fiction fandom. The performances of women like Betty Mulharen, Virginia McCay, Bernice Goldberg, and Mary Byers in the letter columns, and, later, the important contributions of Virginia Kidd and Judith Merrill, fans in the 1930s whose later work as editors, writers, and agents laid the fictional and institutional foundations for the feminist science fiction of the 1970s, suggests that female readers were able to read even pulp-magazine science fiction against the grain and see something of value in it. Sisters to Edna Graves, whose dainty dress, girly ways, sassy talk, and powerful, if limited, challenges to male authority stem precisely from the self-representations of business girls who

enjoyed life on their own in the city, these women charmed and befuddled science fictions' chauvinists and made a place for themselves in a field where the enabling belief is that one can always transform the future for the better through acts of creativity, imagination, and will.

Notes

1. Nina Baym first identified the beset manhood theme in American literature and literary history.
2. See Robert VanGiezen and Albert E. Schwenk.
3. For chemical immortality and other elixirs in science, read Bernard Jaffe (161-201). In science fiction, read D. D. Sharp, "The Eternal Man," Thomas S. Gardner, "The Last Woman," and in a late example Eando Binder, "Conquest of Life."
4. On eugenics and nuclear weaponry, see Daniel Kevles's books. See also Ed Regis on US chemical warfare programs.
5. For their stories, see Sharon Bertsch McGrayne.
6. This despite Justine Larbalestier's and Robin Roberts's findings showing that pulp-era science fiction cast women (alien or human) in more active, powerful, interesting, and threatening roles than is usually remembered. Larbalestier traces the "Battle of the Sexes" story first identified by Joanna Russ from the 1920s to the 1990s. Though Roberts examines large and powerful female aliens in 1950s pulp paperbacks, the motif can be traced further back through the pulp magazine era of the 20s and 30s (consider Charles Willard Diffin's "The Long Night," as well as C. L. Moore's "Shambleau") to H. Rider Haggard's Ayesha character in *She* (1887).
7. This self-characterization of science fiction's earliest fans puts my research in dialogue with Michael Denning's and Erin Smith's.
8. Science fiction historians (scholarly and fan alike) have repressed the working-class accents of pulp SF and been content to characterize it as a form of children's literature justly and rapidly replaced by a more mature form of "speculative fiction." Science fiction writer Brian Aldiss acknowledges the "illiteracy" of American pulp science fiction's immigrant audiences as an explanation of its simple, even simplistic, rhetorical features, but dismisses the stories of this period as little more than "enormous paellas of color, mystery, and excitement for hungry adolescent stomachs" (157). Thomas Disch, whose own science fiction makes fascinating use of pulp conventions (see his *Camp Concentration*), nevertheless thinks that pulp fiction is read simplistically by simplistic readers seeking simple escape. He writes: "by far the great part of pulp fiction from the time of Wells till now was written to provide a semi-literate audience with compensatory fantasies" (205). Brian Stableford, Edward James, and Brooks Landon all treat this period as foundational, but each historian constructs his synthesis by characterizing the fiction of the pulp era as an

embarrassingly immature form superseded in the late 1930s by the Cambell-Heinlein-Asimov-Clarke Golden Age. (To be fair, Stableford has written useful and insightful essays about pulp writers, including David H. Keller, Clark Ashton Smith, Edmond Hamilton and others.) As a result of this pattern of historical explanation, the pulp era of American science fiction continues to receive little rigorous attention from scholars, and mostly antiquarian interest from fans. More recently, Justine Larbalestier, Gary Westfahl, Batya Weinbaum, and I have begun the work of understanding the pulp period of American science fiction according to its own logic and in its own historical moment.
9. On the relationships among Havelock Ellis's sexology, the new material conditions of life for women, and career-oriented unmarried women's sexual practices, see Carol Smith-Rosenberg.
10. For sample ads with these phrases, see the *New York Times* employment section of December 5, 1926, page W4.
11. To decode the lesbian subtext of such criticisms, see Christina Simmons, Carol Smith-Rosenberg, and Esther Newton.
12. This synthesis is culled from the following newspaper articles and letters to the editor: [n.a.,] "The Bachelor Girl: The Real and Ideal," E. B., "Young Women Stenographers," Raymond W. Snavely, "The Ideal Girl: A Man Defines Her, as Opposed to Two Other Types, Bachelor Girl, "Wise and Quiet Girls: The Kind Men Approve, but Do Not Seek in Marriage," [n.a.], "The Girl of Today," Another Bachelor, "The Marriageable: Often Just the Type that Miss Their Mates," Frederick Carle, "A Married Man's View: He Does Not Think Much of Careers for Married Women," George Birdseye, "The Bachelor-Girl," Gwen Warren, "Married Women Workers: Kind Words for their Misrepresented Husbands," A. R. L., "Wouldn't Be a 'Queen': The Boarding House Girl Defends Her Single Blessedness," [n.a.], "Experts to Discuss Working Girl's Life: What She Wears, Eats and How She Plays, Will be Analyzed at Conference Tomorrow," [n.a.], "Business Girl Spurns Lunch of Salads, Fruit For Sandwiches, Coffee, Desserts, Says Report," [n.a.], "Business Women's Budgets," Bachelor, "Advice for 'Discouraged Worker'," [n.a.], "Dress Comes First in Girls' Budget: Conference Speakers Say That Workers Risk Their Health for Clothing," [n.a.], "Average Business Girl Earns $33.50 a Week [in 1929]: Saves $4.75," [n.a.], "New Woman, Old Style," [n.a.], "Depicts Girls' Life on $5 to $7 a Week," Barbara Boyd, "Bachelor Living for Business Women," and [n.a.], "Harsh Critics of Modern Girl Praise the 'Old Fashioned' Maid."
13. On late-Victorian era "strenuous" masculinities in the United States, see John Higham, Peter Filene, Richard Slotkin, and Anthony Rotundo.
14. On this discourse, see Lisa M. Fine (51-75).

15. Reversing Thomas Gardner, Mrs. Martin also fears the reduction of "maternal yearnings" following the near-future development of "self-setting radium incubators in which infants could be deposited at birth" (SM4).
16. See for example Fannie Hurst's account of her companionate marriage to violinist and composer Jacques Danielson in Rose C. Feld's 1923 *New York Times* article "Eight Years After Novel Marriage." On Progressives' advocacy and criticisms of companionate marriage, see Christine Simmons, Carol Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, Karsten Piep, and Peter Filene.
17. According to Keller, except for "spinsters" and prepubescent girls, women who "continually and steadfastly refuse to perform their duty to the race and themselves by becoming mothers, are to be classed with some lesser form of creation. They are certainly not the women God created" (80).
18. For a different account of this exchange, see Justine Larbalestier (120-8).
19. Asimov could not have been more wrong. Many pulp romance stories were written by men such as William Wallace Cook, some of them by men who wrote hard-boiled male-oriented stories in other genres.

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